



City of Seattle

Investigations

Introduction

Initial and follow-up domestic violence investigations are grounded in a comprehensive response procedure and involve a number of best practices that include:

- risk/danger assessment
- thorough approach at the initial contact including adherence to officer safety procedures,
- prescribed contact procedures including location of potential weapons, identification of potential witnesses, identification of primary aggressor, assessment and documentation of injuries, separation of parties, documentation of victim's and suspect's demeanor and determination for need of a translator,
- use of effective interview techniques determined by best practice,
- provision for safe protection of children who may be involved in the incident,
- assessment and documentation of the crime scene, and
- seizure of weapons as provided by law
- call outs to Victim Support Team

The Seattle Police Department is required to complete an Incident Report on all domestic violence incidents where a crime has been committed. In May 2003, as a part of Seattle's broad assessment of its domestic violence response the office of Domestic and Sexual Violence Prevention asked Praxis International, Inc., to conduct a text analysis of Seattle Police Department (SPD) domestic violence incident reports. While many positive procedures were noted in the report (i.e., officers documenting and photographing injuries, calling for medical attention, noting of victim and suspect appearance, reporting on involvement under the influence of alcohol or drugs, etc.) the text analysis of reports raised several issues about documentation of investigation and risk assessment that included:

- The incident report and Domestic Violence Incident Supplemental Report (DVISR) often omitted the substance of and context of the incident. Many narratives lacked detail, particularly when combined with a missing DVISR;
- Incident reports suggested inconsistent patrol response in investigation and evidence collection. For example, contact information for victims, witnesses, and suspects was often missing or incomplete. In all but one case there was no information about the suspect's access to firearms;
- Risk/danger assessment was often missing or incomplete. Of the 89 reports, 39 lacked information about prior domestic violence and 52 lacked information about prior domestic violence related arrests. This included cases involving assaults in public places and strangulation;
- Children were nearly invisible in the incident reports. There was little information regarding the presence and welfare of children;
- Attempts to locate "At Large" suspects were limited and inconsistent;
- On-site victim support and referrals to other domestic violence resources were missing. Only two reports out of 89 cases requested assistance from the Victim Support Team; and
- Articulation of primary aggressor considerations was evident, but inconsistent.

Other areas raised by the assessment or through the work of the assessment committee for further exploration are:

- Return to Scene by primary investigating officer as investigative best practice;
- Criminal History checks at the scene;
- Caseload of domestic violence and other elder abuse reports in Domestic Violence Unit;
- Quality control on DV Incident Reports is needed at the precinct level; and
- Low capacity of Misdemeanor DV case follow up.



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Recent developments

Recent improvements, enhancements, and accomplishments include:

- All front line officers and supervisors completed mandatory eight-hour training in Domestic Violence Best Practices, including modules on the following topics, primary aggressor, stalking, elder abuse, strangulation, court orders, custodial interference, report writing, evidence collection and animal abuse;
- The formation of a Domestic Violence Firearm Forfeiture and Seizure Committee to begin developing policies and procedures and best practices for firearm removal;
- Analysis of impact of elder abuse complaints on the DV Unit, including resource needs;
- Redesigned best practices training for other law enforcement agencies and other domestic violence service providers;
- Completed follow-up roll call training to front line personnel regarding incorporating Victim Support Team volunteers as integral to SPD DV response;
- Sustained DV Unit grant funded victim advocate positions working on felony level cases and co-located with investigators;
- Work towards a new online reporting system to provide electronic, and when necessary paper, information on location history and individual history; and
- Work to develop a DV and Firearms roll call training.

The plan that follows below extend the current work of SPD over the next two to five years and suggest procedural steps to put into practice a more thorough domestic violence investigation process.

Cross Reference: Advocacy and Victim Services, Firearms, Prosecution Plan, and Victim Defendants